

Significant gestures: Roman rhetoric and the body

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Body language

The Roman orator Cicero is said to have suspected a tyrannical purpose beneath the seemingly benign surface of Julius Caesar's political speeches. 'On the other hand', he is said to have added, 'when I look at his hair, which is arranged with so much precision, and see him scratching his head with one finger, I cannot think that this man would ever imagine so great a crime as the overthrow of the Roman constitution'. What is it about a neat hairdo and an itchy scalp that implies inability to commit grand treason?

It is a much-debated question. Does the gesture, for example, imply sexual availability? Or an effeminate preoccupation with hairstyling? But perhaps the most striking feature of the anecdote is the lack of any explanation: even the author who passes it down to us, Plutarch, a Greek from rural Boeotia, writing some 150 years after the event, understands (and expects his readers to understand) what is going on without giving them further guidance. In cases like this, we are reminded once again just how alien the cultures of classical antiquity can seem. Not that antiquity has a monopoly on strangeness. All societies have complex ranges of gestures, often with strong local particularities. The body is as much a medium of communication as the words that we speak. Body language can reinforce, undermine, and even (in the case of signing for the deaf) fully replace verbal language. Like words, what is more, gestures are only fully intelligible to those who share a common culture.

So what can Roman oratory reveal about gesture and the body? After all, Cicero, in Plutarch's anecdote, analyses Caesar's skill as both politician and orator. His speeches – we are told – say one thing, but his body language says something else. The way that the speaker's body carries and projects itself is a crucial (and in this case subversive) component of the overall political message.

See and be seen

Roman orators, then, were carefully scrutinised for their gestures. Such attention was nothing new. Already in classical Athens, the fourth-century orator, Aeschines, can be found contrasting the contemporary fashion for wild and showy gesturing with a statue of the famous Athenian law-giver, Solon, with its hand tucked firmly inside its cloak. But as we move from Greece to Rome, we notice a far greater emphasis on the importance of performance. Rome is a culture of spectacle: important men physically display and prove their importance whether in the court room, Senate or popular assembly, or at the games, in a chariot in a triumph or in the porches or *atria* of their own houses. Power, for Romans, is not a concrete property an individual owns once and for all: to be powerful (whichever of the many kinds of power we are considering), the individual needs to be tried and tested as such by others.

This is why Roman oratory is so obsessed with ideas of seeing and being seen. Let us take, for example, Cicero's speech in defence of Cluentius. When taking apart Sassia, Cluentius' mother (whom he claims to be behind the prosecution), Cicero thunders: 'Here she is: this woman with her shamelessness, moneybags and cruelty!'. The audience is invited to turn their

eyes on her. Later: 'You *see*' what a criminal she is! Of Oppianicus, the father of the current prosecutor: 'I will *show* you why Cluentius prosecuted him ... so that you can *see*' what kind of a man he is. '*Behold* first of all the man's shamelessness!' Oppianicus is, to be sure, dead now – but although the court cannot literally behold him, they are encouraged to see his spirit living on in the form of his same-named son, the current prosecutor. All of this is designed to draw the spotlight towards Cluentius' enemies, to invite the court to read the signs of their moral wickedness written on their bodies. At the same time, of course, Cicero is drawing attention to himself and his own unparalleled performance: his words would surely have been accompanied by authoritative gestures of pointing and moral outrage. If we read a speech like this as a collection of mere words on the page, we shall end up with only a limited grasp of the dynamics of Roman justice.

Ask the expert

For the Roman orator, then, analysis of the body was as important as analysis of the words. How could anyone be expected to succeed in a climate of such hyper-attentiveness to detail? Modern politicians, of course, have teams of expert advisors to ensure the meticulous arrangement of their hair, clothes and skin and the pitch and tone of their voice. Watch a political broadcast carefully, and you will see that every detail of a party-leader's presentation is staged, so as to communicate a particular point. Ancient orators did not have quite as many experts to choose from, but they were not completely at sea. In the late first century A.D., another Roman orator, Quintilian, devoted a substantial portion of the eleventh book of his work on the training of the orator to the disciplining of voice, facial expression, body language and dress. Educational texts like this offer fascinating insights into the political importance of rhetorical gesture. I offer just one example from a huge list: 'To stand with the right foot advanced or to thrust forward the same foot and hand are equally unsightly. At times we can rest our weight on the right foot, but without any corresponding bending of the chest ...' To get to grips with hundreds of recommendations of this kind would surely result in an amazing degree of self-consciousness about what orators did with their bodies.

What is more, when orators wanted advice about what to do with their bodies when in the court-room, they could consult the age-old art of 'physiognomy'. Physiognomists were experts in deducing character from external appearance. That physical and moral excellence were linked was widely accepted in antiquity (the fact that the fifth-century philosopher, Socrates, was so clever and so ugly was the exception that proved the rule). Already in Homer's *Iliad*, we find the best heroes described as the most vigorous and beautiful; and at the other extreme book 2's fearsomely ugly Thersites ('bandy-legged ... lame of one foot, with shoulders stooped and drawn together over his chest, and above this his skull went up to a point with the wool grown sparsely upon it') as the most subversive member of the Greek host.

It is not until the fifth century, however, that we hear of the first professional 'physiognomists'. In the following centuries,

the earliest surviving technical handbook of physiognomy was composed: a work (which may in fact be two works glued together) traditionally attributed to Aristotle, but now widely accepted to have been composed by a later thinker. Antiquity's greatest physiognomist, though, was a Romanised Greek orator of the second century A.D., Marcus Antonius Polemo. His original work is lost, but we have Arabic, Latin and abbreviated Greek versions, enough to show its comprehensive, detailed, ambitious scope. His *Physiognomy* was far from being a disinterested database of character-types: it was first and foremost a guide to the identification of what not to do with one's body.

Polemo was, by profession, both an orator and a physiognomist: is it a coincidence that he excelled at these two skills? Surely not. For one thing, he offers physiognomical critiques of his oratorical rivals' appearance. His main competitor, Favorinus – a man born, so it appears, with some kind of testicular problem – comes in for particular stick: his voice, the Arabic tells us, 'was like a woman's, and likewise his extremities and other bodily parts were uniformly soft. Nor did he walk with an upright posture: his joints and limbs were lax'. Favorinus' body language, in the eyes of his greatest oratorical enemy, communicates his effeminacy (and hence, by implication, his moral and intellectual weakness).

Eyeing up the orator

For further evidence for the connection between oratory and physiognomics, we can look to an invaluable work composed in the third century A.D., the *Lives of the Sophists* of another Greek living under the Roman empire, Flavius Philostratus. This collection of anecdotes and stylistic sketches is a captivating source for anyone interested in the body and ancient oratory. For a start, Philostratus directly links physiognomics and oratory. At one point, he tells of the attempts of Megistias of Smyrna, 'deemed second to none among the physiognomists' (and also himself a practising orator), to get the measure of the orator Hippodromus, a perplexing case whose appearance disguised his true worth: he was 'rather rustic in his appearance, though he revealed an amazing nobility in his eyes, his glance being bright and beaming'. Megistias struggles to decode the signs, but eventually comes up with an accurate reading of Hippodromus' true worth.

It is not just when orators meet specialist physiognomists, however, that their physical characteristics are stressed. Philostratus is absolutely clear that bodily appearance is also important to the audience. For example Alexander (nicknamed for some reason 'the Clay-Plato'), had, we are told, a 'godlike' appearance: a beard with curls like grape-clusters, but moderate of length, large, languid eyes, a well-proportioned nose, the whitest of teeth, and long fingers, appropriate for holding the reins of speech.

Interestingly, Philostratus also tells us that Alexander worked on enhancing his natural charms: in a moment of irritation, the emperor Antoninus Pius referred to him as 'the one who is always arranging his hair, brushing his teeth, polishing his nails, and smelling of perfume'. Some orators were clearly adept at transforming their bodies to maximise effect; and, just as significantly, contemporary onlookers were ready to pounce with accusations of artificiality and deceit. Similarly, in a spoof pamphlet purporting to advise the student of rhetoric, the second-century satirist Lucian suggests a list of less than manly tricks-of-the-trade: see-through clothing, felt booties, 'a shameless singing voice, and a walk like mine ...' Lucian is, of course, milking the picture for laughs; but this example does reinforce our observation that his culture had a strong awareness of, and a powerful language for critiquing, the sophisticated devices that orators would use to maximise the rhetorical power of the body.

When we read the words of a Cicero on the page, we merely skim the surface of the powerful ways in which he communicated his message in the lawcourt. Roman oratory, conducted in this culture preoccupied with visual display, came fully alive

only when embodied in the flesh. Audiences were practised in judging not just the intellectual worth of the argument, but also the presentation of the orator's body: his voice, his face, how he carried and behaved himself, and also how 'natural' or contrived he appeared. We may never know for sure what Caesar's head-scratching actually meant – and to that extent its precise implications will always remain at least partially mysterious. What it and my other examples do stress, however, is the need to be aware of the crucial part played by the orator's hands, arms, body, face, dress and even hair in the delivery and potential success of his oratory.

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